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Hill leaders on both sides score Reagan

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Congressional leaders from both parties yesterday remained sharply critical of President Reagan's handling of arms sales to Iran, with Republicans and Democrats demanding full disclosure when hearings open today on Capitol Hill.

The president's news conference Wednesday night appeared to do little to placate congressional critics from both political parties. Republican and Democratic lawmakers charged that the president traded arms for American hostages held in Lebanon and neglected to inform Congress of the 18-month secret operation.

Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole, one of the president's staunchest supporters, said supplying arms to Iran was a "mistake," but that Mr. Reagan had "good intentions."

"There should not even be a perception of trading arms for hostages," Mr. Dole, Kansas Republican, said. "I think he ought to admit there was a mistake made and move on to something else."

House Majority Leader Jim Wright said he expects the president's aides to provide the intelligence committees all details of the covert Iran operation.

"They'll demand total disclosure of everything that occured," Mr. Wright, Texas Democrat, said after a White House meeting yesterday with Mr. Reagan and House Minority Leader Robert Michel of Illinois.

Sen. Sam Nunn, slated to become chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee next year, said the nation's foreign policy is "in serious disarray." Without a "real house-cleaning" by the president, Congress "is likely to overreact" when the next session begins Jan. 6.

"It seems to me the whole National Security Council concept is in question," Mr. Nunn said. "You're going to have to determine if you're going to allow the National Security Council to be an action agency, carrying out covert activities."

The Georgia Democrat said Mr. Reagan's description of the arms sale as "minuscule" was incorrect. He also questioned the president's description of the weapons as "defensive" and warned that other countries may now feel free to send arms to Iran.

"We may well have given the green light for large arms shipments [to Iran] by other countries," Mr. Nunn said.

Both the House and Senate intelligence committees will meet informally with John Poindexter, the president's national security adviser, at the White House this morning.

Both committees will also hold closed committee hearings this morning. CIA Director William Casey will testify for the administration. High-ranking representatives of the State and Defense departments will also be at the House hearing.

Informed sources said the agenda for the House meeting includes these questions for Mr. Casey:

- What was the role of the NSC in the operation and why was it chosen as opposed to other agencies more suited for the task? What was the role of Israel in the dealings?
- Is Iran still a sponsor of terrorism? Did the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini know of or approve of the dealings? Who are the Iranian moderates the NSC dealt with?
- Why was Congress not notified? What did the United States gain?

Both committees will also examine whether the president's actions were illegal. Today's hearings are expected to be the first in a series as Congress opens its probe into Mr. Reagan's covert dealings with Iran.

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David Durenberger, Minnesota Republican, stopped short yesterday of saying laws had been breached. "From what I saw last night, I'm not sure the president has a grasp of the problem," he said.

Mr. Wright said the president "must have been very poorly advised" to think he was not violating several laws — including ones that require timely consultation with Congress on covert activities and forbidding countries from transferring U.S.-supplied arms to other nations.

While invoking the "very wrenching experience following Watergate," Mr. Wright said he hoped to avoid a constitutional confrontation with the White House.

Other lawmakers called for a review of foreign policy decision-making in the White House, suggesting new restrictions on the National Security Council and new laws requiring faster congressional notification of secret operations.

But Sen. Daniel Evans, Washington Republican, cautioned against any congressional move to usurp the president's role in setting foreign policy.

"I don't think we can substitute the judgment of 535 secretaries of state on Capitol Hill for the judgment of the one at the White House," Mr. Evans said.

Sen. Carl Levin, Michigan Democrat and a member of the Armed Services Committee, said the president "does not appear to understand just how badly his actions threaten the chances for peace in the Middle East."

Sen. John Chafee of Rhode Island, a member of the Republican Senate leadership, said Mr. Reagan's credibility has been tarnished. "I think the president is in a difficult spot," he said, "and we really have a credibility problem."

Senate Minority Leader Robert Byrd warned that Mr. Reagan's effectiveness as a leader is at stake. "The American people don't want any more excuses. The fastest way for President Reagan to become a lame duck is for the president to keep making excuses," the West Virginia Democrat said.

But Sen. Alan Simpson, the assistant Republican leader, said, "If everybody's waiting for an apology, it's like if you wait for an apology from your wife. You're not going to get one as long as you wait for it."

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